DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 298 JC 910 517

AUTHOR Cohen, Arthur M.
TITLE Building Indicators of Community College Outcomes.
PUB DATE 16 Jul 91
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented to the Society of College and University Planners (Seattle, WA, July 16, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Transfer Students; *Community Colleges; Comparative Analysis; Definitions; Ethnic Groups; Higher Education; Minority Groups; National Surveys; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Center for the Study of Community Colleges CA

ABSTRACT

In 1989, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges began a project to define and promote student transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities. The project had four purposes: establish a definition of transfer; gather and analyze transfer data from a broad sample of colleges; assist the colleges in establishing continuing procedures for assessing transfer rates; and disseminate information so that all colleges could begin using consistent definitions and collecting uniform data on transfer. The first year of the project was dedicated primarily to establishing a definition and a set of procedures so that the data on transfer could be collected uniformly and so that the colleges would be encouraged to participate. During the second year of the project the definition of transfer rate was stabilized in its most valid, readily understood form. To collect data for the study, the presidents of the 240 colleges in the nation whose student population included at least 20% ethnic minorities were invited to participate in the study. In the first year of the study, 47 colleges participated; and 114 supplied data for the second year of the project. Participating colleges were asked to indicate the number of students entering in the fall of a given year with no prior college experience, the number of those entrants who obtained at least 12 college credit units within 4 years, and the number of the 12-unit attainers who had matriculated at a university within 4 years of leaving the community college. Data were further subdivided by ethnic categories. The data provided indicated that approximately one-half of the entrants with no prior college experience completed at least 12 semester units at the college, and of those, approximately one-fourth transferred. The data also revealed a difference in transfer rates between ethnic minorities. (JMC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED338298

Building Indicators of Community College Outcomes

Arthur M. Cohen

Presentation to Society of College and University Planners

Seattle, July 16, 1991.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Cohen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

JC 910517

Building Indicators of Community College Outcomes

Arthur M. Cohen

Presentation to Society of College and University Planners

Seattle, July 16, 1991.

Under Ford Foundation sponsorship the Center for the Study of Community Colleges began a multi-year, national effort in 1989 to define and promote student transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities. The project had four purposes:

1. establish a definition of transfer;
2. gather and analyze transfer data from a broad sample of colleges;
3. assist the colleges in establishing continuing procedures for assessing transfer rates;
4. disseminate information so that all colleges can begin using consistent definitions and collecting uniform data on transfer.

These four purposes formed the directions for the project in both its first and second years.

The first year, 1989-1990, was dedicated primarily to establishing a definition and a set of procedures so that the data on transfer could be collected uniformly and so that the colleges would be encouraged to participate. To this end an advisory panel was convened, definitions were established, initial data collection

efforts were made, and preliminary analyses were drawn. The first year's project culminated in a Transfer Assembly held in Los Angeles in February 1990.

Establishing the Definition

The second year's effort continued building on the project's purposes. The definition of transfer rate was stabilized in its most valid, readily understood form. The advisory panel and the project staff had realized early on that a definition that was filled with complexities would not be accepted or even understood by the community college leaders or by the public. It was important to omit from the calculation considerations of student aspirations, course-taking behavior, college attendance patterns, prior educational attainment, and many of the other permutations that had been included in various prior studies.

A second imperative for stabilizing the definition was that it must be based on data that are feasibly obtained. Few colleges have the capacity for conducting reliable student follow-up surveys, therefore the definition must be based on college records and on information received from the universities to which most of the transferring students go. Because one of the project's purposes was to assist the colleges in establishing continuing procedures for assessing transfer rates, the project staff worked with the institutions at great length to encourage them to collect the data according to the established definition.

As to the definition itself, all calculations must begin with some group. Some public university systems have tracked the

students receiving baccalaureate degrees in a given year, checking transcripts to see how many include credits toward the baccalaureate from the state's community colleges. State-level studies have also centered on the junior class in universities, checking the number who were transferring credits from the state's community colleges: Illinois has done studies of this type. Researchers have also used the National Longitudinal Study data of the High School Class of 1972 and calculated the number of students who went through community colleges on their way to the baccalaureate. Other projects have used the students exiting the community college in a given year and entering a university in the same year: the Berman-Weiler group has used that definition recently in a project engaging around thirty colleges.

The Center for the Study of Community Colleges uses the definition, students entering an institution in a given year with no prior college experience and staying long enough to receive twelve units. The transfer rate is calculated by determining the number of that group who enter a university within four years.

Which of these modes of calculation is most useful? The question, of course, is, "Useful for what?" For making a representation to a legislative committee that is concerned with the community colleges' contribution to the bachelors attainment in that state, the cohort of bachelors recipients is probably most helpful. Legislators know what a baccalaureate degree is and they may be convinced that the community colleges are helping students toward the baccalaureate if the data on the number of bachelors

recipients who have community college credits in their transcript are made available.

But from the community college perspective, for the purpose of assisting decisions about deploying resources in a single institution, the cohort of students who enter in a given year and transfer within four years is considerably more useful. Here the college can estimate the effects of various programmatic efforts such as changes in course prerequisites, new counseling initiatives, the organization of a transfer center, a new articulation agreement with a neighboring university. These activities happen during certain years. Knowing the transfer rate for the students who enrolled in the years just prior to those events makes it possible to consider the effects of these types of initiatives.

In summation, all transfer rate calculation must use some cohort and the best practice uses the cohort that is most useful to the institution. Bachelors recipients or community college leavers could have entered and participated in the community college at any time over a period of years. Starting with a cohort entering in a given year makes it feasible to relate the transfer data to things that were happening in and around the college in a finite span of years.

A second measure of validity of the definition is that the institution must use as a measure in its calculations only students who stayed at the institution long enough to complete at least four college credit classes. The community colleges have sizable

numbers of people, as many as half of their total enrollment at any time, who are merely dropping by to take a class on their way to matriculating in some other institution, who already have degrees and who want to take only a course or two for their own edification, who matriculate but drop out for reasons beyond college control; in short, those who have hardly been touched by the institution. This pattern of swirling students makes for an interesting analysis if the intention is to estimate the college's contribution to the general education level of its entire district. But if the intention is to estimate the college's contribution to baccalaureate degree attainment, then a minimum number of units that each student has taken must be established.

The project also took care to work with the data compilers in each institution in the sample so that the college would control its own data. This bottoms-up approach is essential if the data on transfer rates are to have any effect on the thinking or behavior of college leaders. Data that are aggregated by external agencies and dished back to the colleges from afar, as it were, are routinely ignored. The only possibility for affecting institutional behavior is to have someone within the college make the calculations.

Collecting the Data

Following on these imperatives the Center staff invited the presidents of the 240 colleges in the nation whose student population includes at least 20% ethnic minorities to participate. Those who accepted were instructed to provide the requested

information on a single-page form with three lines: the number of students entering in fall of a given year with no prior college experience; the number of those entrants who obtained at least 12 college credit units within four years; the number of the 12 unit attainers who had matriculated at a university by the latter year. These three lines were subdivided further by ethnic categories: Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, White, other, and total.

As a way of assisting the colleges in providing these data the Center staff interacted with each of the data compilers through mail and telephone and by helping them to reach the necessary officials at the universities or in the state offices where data on university students were held. In California the community colleges sent disks with the requisite information about entrants who obtained 12 units, whereupon the staff contracted with the California State University System to match those data with its own records. The Center staff obtained a tape from the University of California System and ran the match in the Center office. Texas and Illinois also were able to provide data on a wholesale basis. In Texas the Postsecondary Coordinating Board matched the disks sent up by the Texas colleges with its own data files of students entering the public institutions in that state. The Illinois Community College Board, in cooperation with Illinois Board of Higher Education, ran similar matches. These three states accounted for around half of the 114 colleges that participated in the second year of the project.

The Transfer Rates

The colleges that participated in the first two Transfer Assemblies provided the following data.

Entrants with no Prior College Experience
1984 group (48 colleges) N=77903
1985 group (114 colleges) N=191748

Entrants who received 12+ credits within Four Years
1984 group - 39351 or 50.5% of the entrants
1985 group - 89638 or 46.7% of the entrants

Transfers Within Four Years
1984 entratns - 9316 or 23.7% of those receiving 12+ credits
1985 entrants - 21171 or 23.5% of those receiving 12+ credits

In summary, around half the entrants with no prior college experience completed at least 12 semester units (four courses) at the college and, of those, around one-fourth transferred.

Presenting the Findings

The data were presented at ten state and national meetings between November, 1990, and April, 1991. Press releases were sent out with special compilations for the California and Texas data and for the data from the 114 institutions from 27 states that participated. Reactions to date have been similar to the reactions that were received during the first year of the project when 47 colleges supplied the data. People have asked, "Why study transfer? Does that not diminish the community college's other functions?" People have questioned the 12 unit base, arguing usually that it is too low, that a higher number of units taken by each student before transfer would be a more valid way of calculating transfer rates. (And, indeed, the more units a student

takes, the more likely the student is to transfer.) Others have insisted that student intentions, abilities, and attendance patterns should be considered, not realizing that these efforts would make a generalized transfer rate calculation unfeasible. Some comments have been quite supportive, such as "When will your definition and way of calculating transfer rates be accepted as the norm?" "Why do you not expand the sample to include colleges that have less than a 20% minority student body?"

In response to these questions we have explained the project more fully, displayed the data, taking care not to single out any single institution, and considered extending the project past the second year, possibly picking up additional colleges where the minority student population is less than 20 percent. The Center is planning on repeating the call for data, this time using the 1986 entering cohort, and maintaining the definition.

Conclusions

Several corollary events have led the Center staff to conclude that the definition and the approaches to collecting the data are valid. The fact that 47 colleges participated in the first year and 114 in the second year suggests that there is some move toward accepting the definition and procedure. The United States Education Department has bought into the definition and procedure by providing additional funds for data analysis and dissemination.

And the analyses themselves are proving intriguing. For example, the difference in transfer rates between ethnic minorities appears great: 19.6% for black students; 18.2% for Hispanics; 27%

for whites. But these differences are much greater for the sample as a whole than they are within individual institutions. One California college has a transfer rate of 2.8% for its black students, 4.7% for its Hispanics, 4.0% for its whites. Another has a transfer rate of 12.7% for its black students, 11.3% for its Hispanics, 13.8% for its whites. A third has a rate of 18.3% for its blacks, 18.5% for its Hispanics, 19.6% for its whites. These patterns of consistency within colleges are repeated elsewhere. One New Jersey college has a black student transfer rate of 13.6%, Hispanics 15.0%, whites 17.1%. A New Mexico college shows transfer rates of 51.7% black, 48.8% Hispanic, and 57.0% white. Overall, in 39 colleges, the within-college transfer rate for black students was narrower than the between-college rate; in 52 colleges it was greater. However, in 47 colleges, the within-college rate for Hispanics was narrower than the between-college rate and in only 18 colleges was it greater.

Other intriguing discrepancies have appeared. In Illinois, the Hispanic students are more likely to attain 12 or more credits but less likely to transfer. Why are they using the community colleges differently? Why would a college in another state transfer only 10 percent of the students receiving 12 or more credits when its district has strong articulation agreements with a neighboring state university?

These types of questions illustrate what researchers can do when a consistent definition is applied across colleges nationally. But the main effect of the project has been to posit and promulgate

a stable definition of transfer rate and to encourage the colleges to provide the data on their own students. No other approach to data and definitions on student transfer could have had a similar effect. The local-college capacity and tendency to calculate transfer rates routinely may be the project's most enduring outcome.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges
DEC 20 1991